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ABSTRACT

Thirty-one female psychology students with a mean age of 31 years (all enrolled at a public liberal arts institution at which 49% of all students are over the age of 25) were invited to participate in a focus group to discover their perspective of the college experience and identify their concerns as nontraditional students. The group moderator used a four-question outline to guide the group's discussions while encouraging participants to direct the topics. Participants were encouraged to comment on all responses provided by the other group members. Four sessions were held, with an average of eight participants per session. Each session lasted approximately 1.5 hours. The students indicated their overall positive perspective of the college; however, they expressed concerns regarding advisement, registration, and financial aid. Their goals were related more to attaining their degree and obtaining career counseling rather than participating in typical "college activities." The study findings replicated those of a previous study of evening students. The focus group approach was concluded to be both a valuable instructional tool and a useful source of information for the college's administrators. (MN)

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Focus Groups: An Active Learning Approach To Identifying Nontraditional Students' Needs

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Abstract

This project's two-fold purpose was to demonstrate an assessment technique to psychology students while identifying the needs of nontraditional students. Focus groups, simultaneous interviews of small groups of individuals, were modeled in the classroom and conducted with volunteers. The 31 participants were a mean age of 31 years and were all enrolled at a public, liberal arts institution at which 49% of the students are over the age of 25. These nontraditional students indicated an overall positive perspective of the college, yet had concerns regarding advisement, registration and financial aid. Their goals centered on degree attainment and career advisement rather than participation in "college activities". These findings replicated the results of a previous study of evening students - another nontraditional population. This research was a valuable instructional tool while providing useful information to administrators.

FOCUS GROUPS:
AN ACTIVE LEARNING APPROACH
TO IDENTIFYING STUDENTS' NEEDS

One goal of this project was to provide an active learning experience to psychology students. The second was to identify the concerns of nontraditional students. The focus group assessment technique was selected for demonstration in the classroom. Students were instructed regarding research design followed by participation in a focus group. Through this activity, the needs of nontraditional students were identified.

Focus Groups are simultaneous interviews of small numbers of individuals. This form of exploratory research is used to discover ideas and insights, and allows for concentrated and detailed input from the participants (Selltiz, Wrightsman, & Cook, 1986). The technique is designed to stimulate and promote interaction among the participants who share a common link. In this case, being a nontraditional student. Group discussion is directed by a moderator who follows a flexible outline of explicit issues within a broad framework of general questions (Greenbaum, 1988). The purpose is to break vague problem areas into smaller, more precise categories (Churchill, 1991) with little influence being exerted by the moderator (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). The Focus Group design was cited as an assessment method in the APA report on undergraduate education (McGovern, 1993) and was selected as an appropriate method for demonstration. This exercise provided a model of the method under study and an opportunity to experience this approach as a participant while contributing to an actual research project.

The second objective of this research was to identify the needs of nontraditional students by discovering their perspective of the college experience. Nontraditional students were chosen as the participants in this research because they are the fastest growing populations on our campuses. At this public, liberal arts institution, the student body is 49% nontraditional and 36% female nontraditional. As this "new majority" (Cohen, 1993) appears in ever increasing numbers, it is appropriate to reevaluate curriculum and resources. The focus group approach supports this process (Morgan & Krueger, 1993). Therefore, the objectives of this project were to demonstrate the focus group method through an active learning experience while exploring the needs of nontraditional students.

Method

Participants

The 31 female participants were a mean age of 31 years. The majority, 48%, were seniors with 26% being juniors and 13% each in their first and second year. The group was broad based with a range of majors in terms of schools within the college from 55% in Arts and Sciences, 26% in Health Professions, 13% in Education and 6% undecided.

Apparatus

A four question outline was designed for the moderator to use during the group discussions (see Appendix). The questions were general, open ended and covered broad topics, with the outline serving as guide to more specific issues. The first question establishes the general perceptions of the group and sets the context for each of the sessions. The remaining questions and outline can be used to direct dialogue as needed.

Procedure

Content information about the focus group technique was presented to the class. Participants were then randomly assigned to groups for actual participation in a focus group. There was an average of 8 participants at each of 4 sessions. The same format was followed at all sessions beginning with introductory remarks and instructions presented by the moderator. An open environment was created and rapport established. The rules outlined were that the moderator would facilitate the discussion and that everyone would participate. Record keeping policies were explained and consent was obtained.

The moderator guided the interview according to the question outline while encouraging participants to direct the topics. Participants were exposed to the points of view of the other members of the group and comments on all responses were encouraged. Each session lasted approximately 1 hour 30 minutes. A class discussion followed to address student questions regarding the method.

Results

In terms of the first objective, students responded enthusiastically to this active learning experience. Their comments indicated that "on the job" training had added to their understanding of focus group assessment. Many students had heard the term, but were unfamiliar with the specifics. For several students, this was also their first time as participants in a research project.

Since Focus Groups design is a qualitative approach, statistical analyses are not applicable. Rather, a summary report centering on the objectives of the Focus Groups is more appropriate. Results should be interpreted as individual comments regarding individual opinions. The findings are the perceptions of the participants.

The objectives of the Focus Groups were to identify the primary concerns of nontraditional students on this campus. Further objectives were to explore the perspectives of these students regarding the college experience and the enrichment of that experience.

The first broad question was designed to identify the students overall feelings about being nontraditional students. The participants stated a positive, comfortable feeling and indicated that they "fit in" well on campus. They were excited about being students and enjoyed their interactions with "younger" students. In this initial response, the students spontaneously complemented the faculty, the small class size and the high quality of their education. They mentioned the obvious respect between faculty and students. Faculty made them feel important which added to their learning experience. The curriculum was difficult and more challenging than at other institutions, but well worth the financial investment.

Several key concerns were identified, with advisement being the prime area. Getting proper advisement, especially as a new, nontraditional student was viewed as a problem. The process had left a "bad taste". Students felt that advisement needed to be defined and separated from Registration. The process was incomplete. It should be more than "just a signature". Information regarding majors is needed along with a mechanism to "learn the language". Once students identified a major and located within a department, improvements in the process were common.

Registration was the next area discussed. There is a need to decrease the waiting time in line. Students felt "tenacity" was the key to survival. Suggestions for improvement were made from calling-in to two day registrations immediately prior to the start of the quarter. Seniors felt they should have first choice.

The topic of difficult experiences in connection with Financial Aid arose frequently throughout the discussions. Students expressed a need for more support, flexibility and organization. Students felt "invisible". "Financial Aid Day was a great idea, but not well executed." A cover letter with the forms and "more information" to new students were recommendations.

In terms of quality of instruction, participants reiterated their high regard for the faculty. "Fantastic, helpful, dedicated" were frequent comments. Faculty were found to care about learning. Students were pleased that the evaluations are read by Department Heads. The one problem area identified was with part-timers who were new to teaching. Upper division courses were challenging, but some core courses were not.

Concerns were expressed about the initial contact with the campus. Students commented that the interactions were "poor" and that no one cares. Many "didn't get a good start" and reported negative attention. Again, a need for more information was mentioned.

"More classes in general" was the prime concern regarding scheduling. Being "locked out" of required courses was a common occurrence. Students also requested more upper level courses in the summer and an increase in the frequency of upper level required courses.

In terms of support services, several problems were discussed. In regard to parking, one suggestion was made to open some faculty spots for evening classes. The lighting was seen as "poor", especially near the library, the Health Professions building, the dorms and the computer center. Better locations for the new "call boxes" and the availability of an outside telephone when the buildings are locked were

discussed. There is also a concern regarding the lack of visibility of campus police especially at night. Career advisement was seen as another area for which students needed more information. Students felt that book prices were "outrageous" and that not enough used books were available. Some students purchase their texts from the mall stores at much lower prices.

Regarding the availability of degree programs, the overall impression was that there were "not enough". Interest was expressed in new programs in accounting, business, ceramics, economics, engineering, journalism, pathology, public administration, public relations, and sociology. There were also questions regarding graduate programs in psychology, law and urban studies.

Participants stated that their primary goal as students centered on obtaining a degree and for some, increasing self-esteem. Participants indicated that the college experience should include both academics and an element of career advisement and preparation. They are focused on their educations and not interested and don't have time for activities and social functions. "Activities are not in my time schedule. I don't need them." "I've already done those things." Some participants requested optional participation in athletic and activities fees. Others did not mind paying for activities even though they saw them as centering on the traditional students. Questions were raised regarding the distribution of fees. It was proposed that more funds be appropriated for "interesting electives" rather than for activities.

The last objective of the Focus Groups was to obtain students' suggestions on how the college could enrich their experience. Students asked that the administration "listen" to their concerns and take action on the issues - such as increasing support services. Students believe that they are "second class citizens" and they want a

voice in issues concerning them. The physical education requirement was one example. They also asked that the college be more "flexible" and realize that nontraditional students have many other roles including at work, at home and as a parent. The participants felt that the college should be more "user friendly".

Discussion

This project was valuable in fulfilling both of its purposes. The students instructed in the Focus Group design within the classroom had the opportunity to learn "on the job" in an actual study. They were able to see and participate in a growing research approach. The nontraditional female population as a whole also benefitted from the report of the Focus Groups as it identified specific areas of concern that were conveyed to the administration. In addition, the findings replicated those of Focus Groups conducted with Evening Students - another nontraditional population. A next step would be a survey of nontraditional students as a whole carried out as a classroom activity.

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